

Country-of-origin labeling begins this week

By JOAN OBRA
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Finally, after six years of waiting, country-of-origin labeling has arrived.

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Starting this week, retailers are required to tell shoppers if their fresh fruits and vegetables, beef, lamb, pork, chicken, goat, fish, shellfish and certain types of nuts come from a different country.

What does this mean for consumers? Look more closely at food packaging for words such as "Product of the USA," "Produce of the USA," "Grown in Mexico," or "China." The words will appear on placards, signs, labels, stickers, twist-ties and other displays, according to the United States Department of Agriculture.

Enforcement of the new rules will begin on April 1, 2009. Violators will be fined \$1,000 per violation.

It's not the first time we've seen such labels. U.S. customs rules of origin require packaged and imported foods to indicate the country they come from. And country-of-origin labeling (also known as COOL) for fish and shellfish started earlier.

Full implementation of the legislation, part of the 2002 Farm Bill, was delayed amid food companies' grumbling that compliance would be costly. An example is large meat companies that import cattle. Instead of processing cattle separately according to where they were imported from, the companies have the option of choosing a label that indicates several possible countries of origin.

The American Farm Bureau Federation has protested the loophole, as have 30 U.S. Republican and Democratic senators, including presidential candidate Sen. Barack Obama.

"It is not the intent of Congress that all U.S. product or such product from large segments of the industry be combined with the multiple countries of origin category nor was it dictated by statute," states a letter from the senators to Secretary of Agriculture Ed Schafer. "The purpose of COOL is to clearly identify the origin of meat products, providing consumers the most precise information available. This interim final rule, if left without clarification and proper guidance on this issue, has the real possibility of undermining the program...."

So far, the USDA hasn't tightened the rule.

For their part, consumer groups aren't concerned with adjustments companies have to make. Given recent food-safety scares, they welcome the labels.

"If a food safety problem is identified in a particular imported product, as happened with jalapeno and serrano peppers from Mexico earlier this year, then consumers will be able to avoid that product," says Jean Halloran, Director of Food Policy Initiatives for Consumers Union, nonprofit publisher of Consumer Reports. "On the other hand, some people like to buy certain imported products, like New Zealand lamb or Holland tomatoes. Still others just want to buy local produce. Either way, the new labels will give consumers important new information."

Current country-of-origin regulations only cover fresh foods, however, so concerned shoppers need to study the rules. For example, ham, bacon, peanut butter and roasted nuts are not subject to the new labels because they are processed. Fresh fruit salad, frozen stir-fry vegetables, and mixed salad greens also don't require labels because they are mixtures.

For shoppers' convenience, Consumers Union has created a printable guide to country-of-origin labeling. Download it at consumersunion.org/pdf/CU-Cool-Tool.pdf.

And for the most country-of-origin labels, shop at supermarkets. Only stores defined by the Perishable Agricultural Commodities Act - ones that buy more than \$230,000 of fresh and frozen produce yearly - must comply with COOL rules.

That means you won't find the labels at seafood markets, meat markets or restaurants.

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